

Why the AEC Failed to Tell Of Lost Nuclear Materials

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The former Atomic Energy Commission, confused and embarrassed by the worst loss of nuclear materials in its history, decided in 1966 to conceal the problem from the public on grounds that premature disclosure "could lead to sensational and probably inaccurate press reports."

According to a previously classified document released today by the Senate Government Affairs Committee, the source of the embarrassment was the unexplained loss of 202 pounds of highly enriched uranium from a plant at Apollo, Pa., a disappearance that was first discovered in late 1965. Highly enriched uranium can be used to make an atomic bomb.

IN A SECRET BRIEFING attending by the AEC commissioners and top staff members, according to the document, Howard C. Brown, then the agency's general manager, admitted that because the AEC's safeguard system then rested on a "presumption of honesty" it "might not reveal a deliberate and systematic attempt" to divert nuclear material to a foreign government.

As Brown put it, if one presumed the honesty of company officials handling highly enriched uranium, then the AEC's accountability system "could be characterized as reasonably good. If, however, the presumption of honesty were removed, the system did not present itself in the most credible light."

The CIA has told congressional investigators that it later developed a "strong opinion" that the company involved, the Nuclear Materials & Equipment Corp. (NUMEC), may have been the source of uranium that later wound up in what CIA believes to be Israel's nuclear weapons program.

After releasing the document Sen. John Glenn, chairman of the Senate committee's probe into nuclear safeguard inadequacies, said his panel will closely examine the truth of statements made about NUMEC by government officials.

According to the document, the AEC officials finally resolved their dilemma by developing a "theory" that NUMEC had lost the uranium by consistently underestimating its waste over a period of years.

DURING THE MEETING, which occurred on March 25, 1966, the officials decided to keep the matter secret but prepared a statement "for contingency use" in case questions were raised about NUMEC in public hearings before Congress. Because the "contingency" never arose, the NUMEC incident remained a secret until last summer.

In another development relating to nuclear safeguards, the Department of Commerce's Technical Information Service has removed nine documents on nuclear weapons materials from its list of government publications for sale after the Senate committee revealed yesterday that a 22-year-old Harvard undergraduate student, Dimitri Rostow, had developed a book-length treatise on how to design atomic bombs based on his reading of public documents in the Library of Congress.

Afterward, both Glenn and the State Department requested that control of public documents be tightened to prevent knowledge of the technology from falling into the hands of terrorist groups.